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**Citation for published version:**

Adams, N 2011, Scriptural Reasoning and Interfaith Hermeneutics. in D Cheetham (ed.), *Interreligious Hermeneutics in Pluralistic Europe*. Amsterdam: Rodopi.

**Link:**

[Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer](#)

**Document Version:**

Peer reviewed version

**Published In:**

Interreligious Hermeneutics in Pluralistic Europe

**Publisher Rights Statement:**

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## Scriptural Reasoning and Inter-Faith Hermeneutics

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Scriptural reasoning is a well-established practice of text study between Jews, Christians and Muslims.<sup>1</sup> Until recently it was located largely in university contexts, principally at the American Academy of Religion, but also in projects in the University of Virginia (led by one of the founders of scriptural reasoning, Peter Ochs), in Princeton (at the Center of Theological Inquiry) and in Cambridge (in the Faculty of Divinity, led by the Cambridge Inter-Faith Programme). Over the last few years it has spread as a civic practice, especially in Virginia and in London.

My task here is to answer the question: how fruitful might scriptural reasoning be as a model for inter-religious hermeneutics? This question arises, in part, because of the perhaps surprising intensity with which scriptures are now at the heart of much inter-faith encounter. Making sense of this phenomenon requires us to consider different forms of this intense focus on scriptures, to describe them as fully as possible, and to consider the ways in which they present opportunities and challenges to relations between members of religious traditions. I will claim that scriptural reasoning addresses certain quite specific needs among specific participants who share certain specific assumptions about their own traditions and their relations with others. Part of my task will be to elaborate those assumptions. The first part of my argument describes some of the features that I take scriptural reasoning to display. The second part discusses issues of world-disclosure and problem-solving, and suggests why this way of thinking about inter-religious hermeneutics might be fruitful. I argue that scriptural reasoning offers an important contribution to inter-faith encounter in three ways. First, it offers a model for privileging understanding above agreement; second, it enables the pursuit of collegiality without requiring consensus; third, it embodies the right relation between world-disclosure and problem-solving.

### Key Features of Scriptural Reasoning

Scriptural reasoning is not the only practice of inter-faith engagement where participants read each others scriptures, in this case Tanakh, New Testament and Qur'an. The Shalom Hartman Institute in Jerusalem has an annual conference in which inter-faith 'hevruta' is conducted.<sup>2</sup> As these two practices are often taken to be identical, and as it is useful to throw into relief what makes scriptural reasoning distinctive, comparing the two may offer some useful resources.<sup>3</sup> I will refer to Hartman Hevruta and scriptural reasoning as names for the two types.

To begin with, it is useful to identify what they share. This is, in any case, what I think would strike any new participant who has an opportunity to participate. A topic

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1 See David Ford and CC Pecknold *The Promise of Scriptural Reasoning* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006); Nicholas Adams *Habermas and Theology* (Cambridge: CUP, 2006), pp. 234-255; David Ford *Christian Wisdom* (Cambridge: CUP, 2007), pp. 273-303; Peter Ochs and William Stacy Johnson (eds) *Crisis, Call and Leadership in the Abrahamic Traditions* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2009)

2 [www.hartmaninstitute.com](http://www.hartmaninstitute.com). For its own description of the theology conference see [http://www.hartman.org.il/Center\\_Adv/Program\\_View.asp?Program\\_Id=9](http://www.hartman.org.il/Center_Adv/Program_View.asp?Program_Id=9) (as at 19.5.10)

3 For a blog which describes, in detail, a scriptural reasoning conversation see the description by Mike Higton 'A Session of Scriptural Reasoning' at <http://goringe.net/theology/?p=179> (as at 19.5.10)

is chosen by a committee. Scriptural texts relating to that topic are selected, along with commentary in the traditions. Tanakh texts are normally chosen by Jews; New Testament texts are normally chosen by Christians; Qur'an texts are normally chosen by Muslims. The scriptural texts are discussed in small groups of half a dozen people. These small groups are composed of members of the different traditions, although not always in equal numbers from each tradition. Plenary sessions are held in which some of the issues are explored. There is an explicit ethos: participants are not required to set aside their strong commitments to their traditions; they are not expected or encouraged to agree with each other about any specific issue; they are not attempting to solve some urgent problem using scriptural study as a method.

There are, however, significant differences between the two practices. Hartman Hevruta scriptural texts are selected by an invited speaker, who also selects the commentary. Texts are distributed at the opening of the conference. The speaker introduces the texts, perhaps explaining why they were chosen. The conference breaks up into small groups to study the texts. The conference reconvenes as plenary, and the speaker presents some interpretations of the texts, after which there is opportunity for questions and wider discussion. The texts from each tradition are given their own separate sessions: a day is spent on texts from one tradition; and a second day is spent on texts from a second tradition and so forth. Small groups have one session for each of the traditions: one session on Jewish, one on Christian and one on Muslim texts. In plenary discussion, questions and comments are first invited from members of the tradition whose texts are being studied, often called 'the inner circle'. For example, if that day's study is devoted to Qur'an, hadith and mystical texts, it will be Muslims who engage first with the speaker, and the discussion will gradually be opened out to Jews and Christians after a suitable period. The reason for this is sometimes explicitly stated for newcomers: to start with the 'inner circle' is to display the variety of interpretations within a tradition, and to ensure that a false homogeneity is not generated under pressure from questions outside the community.

Scriptural reasoning texts are selected by a committee, who also select the commentary (although commentary may not be selected). The texts are not normally introduced, but are distributed in advance, and members are encouraged to study them individually beforehand. There are normally no named speakers. The primary activity is small group study (also often called 'hevruta'). If there is a plenary gathering, because there is more than one small group, there may be some reporting back of what was discovered. In some meetings, participants may be encouraged by the organisers to reflect on what they were doing, and in academic settings may be asked how it relates to the practices of the modern university, especially in relation to the study of scriptural texts. The scriptural texts from the three traditions are presented together, and it is left to small groups to determine whether they study one or more texts from one tradition or multiple traditions. It is quite common for small groups to meet several times during a meeting (over a few days) and to build up a set of readings of the texts. By the end, it is expected that texts from the different traditions will interact with each other. There is no requirement that members from a particular tradition will guide study of that tradition's texts, although this often happens in practice.

Perhaps the most important difference is that Hartman Hevruta is a small, select group of some of the world's best scholars in Judaism, Christianity and Islam - they number

perhaps fifty, and attendance is by invitation only. Scriptural reasoning, by contrast, consciously seeks to reproduce itself in a variety of new contexts, and in a variety of different forms.

This also introduces an important difference relating to who does this kind of text study. Who is invited? Who is not invited? Can people be uninvited? Can people be excluded, and if so how are decisions made? Where does executive power lie?

It is hazardous to generalise too energetically on this question, as there are important differences depending on the kinds of group, how long they have been meeting, how well the participants know each other and so forth. In the case of both Hartman Hevruta and scriptural reasoning, where there are groups that have been meeting for some time, over a period of years, and where there is well-established trust among the long-standing members from the three traditions, questions of this kind are handled through consultation by the organisers (who will typically come from all three traditions), with deference given to those organisers from the same tradition as the person or persons concerned. In my experience of scriptural reasoning, it is generally Christians who invite Christians, Muslims who invite Muslims, Jews who invite Jews. Most people who participate in scriptural reasoning have been invited by someone from the same tradition (often called the same 'house'). The same is true for difficult cases where groups seem not to be flourishing because of disruptive behaviour. In my experience, questions of exclusion are generally handled within houses; only where there are long-term relationships of trust are these matters discussed in front of members of other houses.

An example may help to clarify some of these questions. There is a group of scholars who meet annually to reflect on the role of scriptural reasoning in the academy. It meets twice each year, for two or three days at a time. It recently devoted two years to studying texts about women from Tanakh, New Testament and Qur'an. These include narrative texts, such as those in Genesis relating to Jacob and his wives; and also more pastoral texts, such as Paul on relations between men and women in relation to God and the church, and Qur'anic texts about disciplining wives in relation to family life. The group returned to the same texts in successive years, sometimes adding to or subtracting from them. As the two years elapsed, the length of the scriptural passages presented for study was reduced. This reflected the fact that the group was more deeply immersed in the texts, so that longer was required for each; it was also a practical consequence of an increased volume of commentary on the table. The introduction of commentary reflected a growing interest in the transmission of prior generations' readings of those same texts. The group did not find these texts on women straightforward to read, and members of the small groups displayed keen awareness that these texts have been, and are, used to legitimate practices that are ungenerous at best and profoundly violent at worst. The study proved immensely fruitful for discovering shared challenges to thinking about changing attitudes to women in the modern world, in each tradition, and for finding out differences of emphasis, different kinds of resistance to change, and different kinds of openness about the issues.

Two aspects concerning the quality of discussion and the kinds of attitude it exhibits are especially noteworthy. First, it is obvious that discussion in scriptural reasoning is not primarily oriented to agreement. It is oriented to understanding. That means

members of small groups are not trying to agree with each other about how to think about women in relation to families, husbands, fathers, mothers, brothers and sisters, religious life, religious authority, civic authority or the workplace. If agreements are reached, that is interesting, and sometimes very highly valued. But the main goal is to understand our own traditions, each others' traditions, and the relations between traditions on the issues under discussion.

Second, instead of attempting to generate consensus within groups, the main fruits of discussion are perhaps best described as collegiality. I mean this in the sense of forming a bond, in which there is the possibility of long-term shared action. In scriptural reasoning there is no forming of a gang, or a new religious group. In my experience of ten years of scriptural reasoning, consensus in the small groups has been rather rare, but there has been a steady flourishing of collegiality.

This picture is partial, and some caveats need to be volunteered. First of all, I have been discussing scriptural reasoning as it takes place in the university. The participants have typically undertaken advanced study in their religious traditions, have large internal libraries at their disposal, are aware of disagreements within their traditions, and can readily identify false claims about their traditions. Rules for who speaks when, how authority is determined, and how disagreements are to be handled are all well established in the academic sphere. But scriptural reasoning now also takes place in the civic realm, among participants who do not necessarily have this kind of background. The Cambridge Inter-Faith Programme has conducted research into this, and its preliminary findings are that civic scriptural reasoning works best when the participants meet in their own traditions beforehand, and where they have a clearly articulated framework of expectations about handling disagreement, disruption and anxieties.<sup>4</sup> This research is work in progress, but it is clear that scriptural reasoning outside the university has a distinctly different character.

Second, I have not said anything about the rationale of those who do scriptural reasoning. Why do they do it? In answering this question, I think it is vital to remember that there are three different traditions in play. In the modern university, we are used to having shared sets of rules for describing, analysing, interpreting and criticising things. Consider feminist theory or post-colonial critique. We are not quite in the habit of distinguishing Christian, Jewish and Muslim feminisms, or Jewish, Muslim and Christian post-colonial discourses. We can do it if we try, but the habits are not deeply ingrained. My second caveat is that where there are three traditions in play, there need to be three sets of descriptions, three sets of analysis, three sets of interpretations and three sets of critiques.

In answer to the question, 'Why do scriptural reasoning?', mine is a Christian rationale. I might experiment with imagining a Muslim rationale; if I had been attentive in other contexts I might even be able to report actual Muslim rationales. But I would be doing something quite different from speaking as a Christian, trying to

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4 The research (funded by the Higher Education Innovation Fund and the Coexist Foundation) was carried out by William Taylor, a Christian priest, whose report notes the need to consider the different qualities that may be displayed by scriptural reasoning when it is led by members of different traditions. A Christian-led group may be significantly different from a Muslim-led group: further investigation is needed.

make sense of my own tradition's ways of understanding hospitality and love of one's neighbour.

To summarise, three slogans can be generated:

- (1) Understanding above Agreement.
- (2) Collegiality above Consensus.
- (3) Not one account of (or rationale for) scriptural reasoning, but three.

I claimed earlier that scriptural reasoning addresses certain specific needs among those who have certain specific assumptions. Where those needs and assumptions are absent, scriptural reasoning may not be fruitful. The needs will take us into the second part of this enquiry, on world-disclosure and problem-solving.

One of the assumptions among participants in scriptural reasoning that the three traditions are likely to persist, in relation to each other, for the long term. There is no prospect of mass conversions from one tradition to another; no prospect of agreement on some of the core issues at the heart of the traditions' accounts of each other; no prospect of consensus on matters of interpretation of sacred texts. There is also no cause for worry in the face of this lack of prospects. To put it rather crudely: if Judaism, Christianity and Islam are features of the world until the eschaton, it is probably wise to develop modes of understanding disagreement that are well fitted for the long haul. Such modes should generate higher quality disagreement if they are done well. This is an urgent need. Those who are experienced in inter-religious engagement frequently report that one of the most serious problems is that fellow participants often do not know even the basics of one's tradition, and that one is forced to run roughshod over the subtleties and complexities of one's traditions, ironing out disagreements where they matter greatly. A Muslim colleague once put it to me like this: when I argue with Christians I find that often I am not arguing at all, but teaching Islam 101.' If practices like scriptural reasoning can help produce better quality disagreement, that is a significant contribution.

### **World-disclosure and Problem-solving**

Consider the following text from the New Testament.

‘The first is, “Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.” The second is this, “You shall love your neighbour as yourself.” There is no other commandment greater than these.’  
(Mark 12:29-31)<sup>5</sup>

This text, repeated with variations in the Gospels of Matthew (Mt 22:37-40) and Luke (Lk 10:25-28), offers a striking juxtaposition and combination of the two tasks of philosophy: world-disclosure and problem-solving.

The two terms world-disclosure and problem-solving became significant foci of debate after their use by Jürgen Habermas in his critiques of Heidegger and Derrida in

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5 New Revised Standard edition

*Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*.<sup>6</sup> The term world-disclosure (*Weltentdeckung*) is elaborated in Heidegger's discussions of the ways in which we occupy a horizon of meanings which appear in various ways, and are especially disclosed through poetry. Habermas famously insists on a differentiation of the tasks of poetry and literature, which quite properly disclose the world to us, and philosophy, which discharges a different task, namely, solving problems through habits of argumentation. Habermas strongly argues against Derrida who, in Habermas' account, elides these two tasks in his descriptions of philosophy as akin to literary criticism.

Habermas is prompted to raise these issues because he discerns a tendency to elide judgements of truth with judgements of taste which accompanies, he argues, a tendency to elide problem-solving and world-disclosure. If one is to distinguish judgements of truth from judgements of taste, one needs to distinguish practices of self-expression from philosophy's specialised practices of argumentation. I think Habermas is right to be prompted by this worry, but, as I have argued in more detail elsewhere, I think his solution offers too much clarity about the tasks of philosophy.<sup>7</sup> Rather than articulate 'the tasks of philosophy' or identify 'what philosophers should do', it seems more fruitful to identify actual practices which seem to model the right relationship between problem-solving and world-disclosure, and to make sense of them. I find in scriptural reasoning just such a model. It is possible that some practices of some philosophers offer other models of this kind, but it is striking that Habermas does not offer detailed investigations into such practices – his tendency is to generalise about 'philosophy', and I see this as a weakness. I argue that in scriptural reasoning questions of truth do not become elided with questions of taste. Rather, the practice of scriptural reasoning makes most sense if one interprets truth-claims as products of chains of reasoning that rest on axioms, and acknowledges that what is axiomatic for one participant may be hypothetical for another. These condensed remarks call for elaboration.

I consider these themes as signs of a familiar problem in modern philosophy: the tendency to separate things that belong together and then trying (often unsuccessfully) to find some way to join them again.

World-disclosure evokes the horizon of meanings against which we make sense of our actions and our place in the world. This horizon is disclosed when we encounter things that cause us to notice the patterns of meaningfulness in which we are embedded. Whenever we struggle to make sense of something, or are obliged to interpret something rather than encounter it unthinkingly, the web of the world's meanings for us is disclosed. Death, the sublime, the poetic: these are all occasions for world-disclosure.

Problem-solving directs attention to the formation and testing of hypotheses, with the purpose of responding to some problem in the world. It identifies fallacies, highlights ambiguities, proposes patterns for inquiry, establishes rules for testing claims, settles criteria for success and failure. Marxist analyses of economic injustice, Freudian analyses of psychological complexes, critical-theoretical analyses of authoritarianism:

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6 Jürgen Habermas *Philosophical Discourse of Modernity* (tr. F Lawrence, Cambridge: Polity Press, 1987), pp.131-160 (esp. pp.147-154) pp.185-210 (esp. pp. 205-209).

7 Nicholas Adams *Habermas and Theology* (Cambridge: CUP, 2006), esp. pp. 234-255.

these would all be examples of problem-solving, as would activities such as investigating questions of medical ethics or law from a philosophical perspective.

In the language of the Christian tradition (and perhaps others) world-disclosure can be heard as an echo of the commandment to love God, and problem-solving can be heard as an echo of the commandment to love our neighbour. To love God is to know ourselves called to participate in an agency that is not ours, to turn to God forsaking all other gods, and to attune our hearts and lives to God's service. It is simultaneously to identify the world as God's creation and to discover our place in it. To love our neighbour is to recognise our social embeddedness, to respond to another's suffering, to turn to those in need and to serve them. It is simultaneously to identify our neighbours and to participate in God's relation to creation. World-disclosure sounds the note of worship; problem-solving sounds the note of healing.

If Habermas' diagnosis is right, it appears that the twentieth century saw something of a polarisation of these two ways of thinking about philosophy. On the one hand, Heidegger and Gadamer made a hermeneutic turn with slogans such as 'Language is the house of being' (Heidegger) or 'Being that can be understood is language' (Gadamer). These were accompanied by evocative readings of Hölderlin's poetry and sustained interest in the ways in which tradition exercises authority over the thinking subject. Likewise, in the middle of the twentieth century, analytical philosophy in the English-speaking world comprehensively turned away from questions of flourishing and suffering towards narrowly focused questions about well-formed sentences and the criteria for identifying meaningful or meaningless claims. At the same time, the Frankfurt School developed a critical theory that was focused on questions of flourishing and suffering; it developed responses to inadequate conceptions of 'reason' and articulating for philosophy its vocation as a problem-solving enterprise. Habermas' sustained critiques of Heidegger and Gadamer (and later Derrida and others) - oriented to their reluctance to articulate the vocation of philosophy as critique - is emblematic of these contrasting conceptions of philosophy.

The analogy with the two great commandments reveals two forms of one-sidedness in Heidegger and Habermas. On the one side, we have a turn towards the love of God divorced from love of neighbour - world-disclosure that neglects problem-solving. On the other side we have a turn towards the love of neighbour without love of God - problem-solving that neglects world-disclosure.

In the twenty-first century, this polarisation is well understood, and various attempts are made to overcome it. The work of JM Bernstein, Andrew Bowie and Peter Dews, and most explicitly the work of Nikolas Kompridis, exemplifies this well.<sup>8</sup> Their projects address the ways in which responses to suffering are bound up in complex ways with questions of what is now called aesthetics but which in older times would simply be called beauty.

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8 Fred Dallmayr *Life-World, Modernity and Critique* (Cambridge: Polity, 1991), J.M. Bernstein *Recovering Ethical Life* (London: Routledge: 1995); Andrew Bowie *Aesthetics and Subjectivity* (Manchester UP: 2003), *Music, Philosophy and Modernity* (Cambridge: CUP, 2007), Peter Dews *The Idea of Evil* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2008), Nikolas Kompridis *Critique and Disclosure: Critical Theory Between Past and Future* (MIT: 2006).



What is more significant for those interested in inter-faith hermeneutics is the recognition that both the problem (the polarisation in Heidegger and Habermas) and the repair (in Bernstein and others) is often pursued in a way that recognises its theological character, but does not engage with the problems theologically. Nearly every major philosopher today is engaged in some kind of 'religious turn', in the sense of paying attention to the role of religious practices and beliefs. This includes the recent work of Habermas himself.<sup>9</sup> Whether sympathetic or hostile, religious life is hard to ignore. This is not quite the same as paying attention to theology, by which I mean here acknowledging and investigating the long histories of scriptural interpretation, development of doctrine, and debates about practices of worship with a view to addressing contemporary concerns.

It is striking that the turn to 'tradition' and 'horizons of meaning' in Heidegger and others, as well as the turn to 'suffering' and 'communicative action' in Habermas, is not presented as a recovery of any tradition in particular, nor to any particular teaching about who the neighbour is, to whose suffering I should respond, and in response to whose claims I should seek to reach understanding in the public sphere.

The best critics of Heidegger and Habermas recognise that the split between world-disclosure and problem-solving is not due to a failure of individual philosophers to keep them together. The work of Heidegger and Habermas expresses actual trends and ruptures in cultural life. Keeping the two dimensions of thought in proper relation to each other is not a matter of fixing mistakes in the philosophical arguments of Heidegger and Habermas. It is more a question of diagnosing how the split is displayed in various cultural forms. For example, Kant's split between truth, moral worth and aesthetic judgement is not his own invention but reflects the already growing trend to separate fact and value, or the socially widespread belief that matters of 'taste' are not amenable to argumentation. Heidegger and Habermas do not cause the split: they reflect a split that already exists. They also deepen it.

One can readily identify tendencies in cultural life today that seem to justify a separation of world-disclosure from problem-solving. Music, poetry, literature and worship are generally viewed as 'expressive'. Medicine, pharmaceuticals, engineering and politics are generally viewed as 'practical'. Music discloses worlds. Medicine solves problems.

The best philosophers recognise this and engage in careful detailed analysis of the ways in which seemingly separate spheres of human action are in fact deeply involved with each other. Andrew Bowie's recent *Music, Philosophy and Modernity* is a model of this kind of work. He shows how questions of musical expression are thoroughly bound up with questions of language and ethics, for example.<sup>10</sup> The striking feature of this kind of work is that it does not try to take two separate things and fuse them, but patiently diagnoses the ways in which the seemingly separate things are, in fact, already joined. This does not deny that there are attempts by reputable philosophers to consider them separate. Yet it does recognise that treating them as separate is not a merely academic mistake: it systematically distorts our ability to make sense of a

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9 e.g. Jürgen Habermas *The Future of Human Nature* (Cambridge: Polity, 2003); Jürgen Habermas and Joseph Ratzinger *The Dialectics of Secularization* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2005); *Between Naturalism and Religion* (tr. C Cronin, Cambridge: Polity, 2008)

10 Andrew Bowie *Music, Philosophy and Modernity* (Cambridge: CUP, 2007)

range of human actions. It ceases to be obvious, as it should be, that universities are for forming young persons' characters as well as for developing cognitive skills or stretching the imagination. It ceases to be obvious, as it should be, that hospitals are places where people confront their deepest hopes and fears as well as diseases and their unwelcome symptoms and consequences.

Despite the modern tendency to separate complex inter-relating patterns of action that belong together, the complexities are stubbornly resistant in a positive way, and it is a mark of the best philosophical investigation that it recognises the *already* connected patterns of human action, and works towards better models and maps, rather than trying - through super-human but ultimately vain effort - to force seemingly separate things together.

This detour into philosophical territory leads us back to scriptural reasoning. Reading scriptures can be a model for addressing and embodying the relation between disclosing the world and solving problems, in a way that does not neglect important theological dimensions. The narratives of God's creation of the world, the establishment and renewal of covenant with Israel, the pursuit of wisdom, Jesus' preaching and healing: these all simultaneously disclose the world, name its suffering, and describe its healing. It is worth repeating that mine is a distinctively Christian account of scriptural reasoning, and that this remains inadequate until it is joined by corresponding Jewish and Muslim accounts.

While world-disclosure and problem-solving are constantly in relation to each other in scripture, they are not in relation to each other in the same way for the communities that read scripture. Peter Ochs has suggested that in times of peace and prosperity, it is the disclosure of the world that is the dominant note: the evocation of what world it is that we live in, the description of who we are in relation to God and the world, and in relation to each other. In times of suffering and pain, it is the repair of the world that comes to the fore: the restoration of the wounded covenant, the healing of the sick, the atonement.<sup>11</sup>

The reader of greatest service to the community is the one who knows how to interpret scripture in such a way as to disclose the world and indicate its repair in ways that describe the community in relation to its circumstances, whether in times of peace or of suffering.

In scriptural reasoning we do not read for 'the community' in this way, because we are at least three communities. I say 'at least', because once Judaism, Christianity and Islam have been named, this merely begins the process of describing the communities from which readers come. I do not only mean that within Judaism there are Orthodox, Conservative and Progressive forms, that within Christianity there are Eastern and Western traditions, or that within Islam there are Sunni and Shi'a traditions. Admittedly, these are important clarifications. I mean that there are also traditions of reading learned in the university, and that these have strikingly different philosophical formations. Rationalist, Idealist and Pragmatist styles of reasoning cut across religious traditions. This often happens in such a way that a Christian and a

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11 Peter Ochs 'Scripture' in David Ford, Ben Quash and Janet Martin Soskice (eds) *Fields of Faith: Theology and Religious Studies in the Twenty-First Century* (Cambridge: CUP, 2005) pp. 104-118

Jew who are both pragmatists may often reach stronger and deeper understanding with each other than two Christians, one of whom is a rationalist, the other a pragmatist, even if the two Christians belong to the same narrow denomination.

Because there are at least three communities, the qualities of world-disclosure and problem-solving are significantly different from how they appear within any one of the three broad Abrahamic houses. They are different first of all because the scriptures are different. Again, these differences are at least three. At the most basic level, the scriptures themselves are different. There is the Tanakh, the Christian Bible and the Qur'an. At the next level, there are some interesting complexities: the Tanakh, interpreted by Talmud is in some sense the same text as the Old Testament, interpreted by Patristic theology. Yet the Tanakh exists in the Masoretic (Hebrew) and Septuagint (Greek) versions, which are not the same as each other. And of course many of the narratives of the Bible are repeated, often with significant variations, in the Qur'an. At the highest level of complexity, the texts are obviously not read 'cold', by and large, but are refracted and received through generations of commentary, which is often commentary on commentary. The lines of commentary spiral in many different directions. In my own tradition, nearly every theologian knows what is meant if one refers to Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, Luther, Calvin, Schleiermacher, or Barth in relation to how they read scripture. The same fine-grained issues are also found in Jewish and Muslim commentary on scripture.

There is an interesting feature of scriptural reasoning in relation to these questions of world-disclosure and problem-solving, however. The scriptural texts may be different between the Abrahamic traditions, and the lines of diverse commentary may be different within each tradition. But the problems faced by these communities are peculiar in that the communities have often been the problem for each other. Engagements between Christians and Muslims have often been what prompted certain interpretations of scripture, especially in the high middle ages. Engagements between Jews and Christians to a significant extent prompted their attempts to secure their particular identities. For Jews, Christians and Muslims to turn to scripture to repair these problems is to see their religious differences - displayed in their different scriptures and their different habits of interpreting scriptures - as part of the solution, as well as a source of severe problems.

I take seriously Habermas' concern that to elide philosophy with literary criticism risks eliding judgements of truth with judgements of taste. In the context of such a concern, it might appear that scriptural reasoning is concerned only with judgements of taste: that it is a practice where different interpretations are juxtaposed, but judgements of truth are indefinitely postponed. It might seem that if there are three sets of descriptions, three sets of texts and three traditions of interpretation - each with its own historically specific categories - questions of truth must surely be off the table. This proves not to be the case, however.

It is not an easy matter to talk of 'religious truth-claims' in general, given the different histories of argumentation inherited in Judaism, Christianity and Islam. Restricting remarks to my own Christian tradition does not solve all of the problems, but it does significantly reduce the scope for confusion. It is worth considering Christian truth-claims, such as 'Jesus is fully God and fully man' or 'God is three in one'. These claims are not generally presented as the concluding parts of a chain of reasoning,

although at a certain point in the history of Christian theology they did have this status. They were once answers to questions. Today, they are presented as axioms. To treat these claims as axioms is part of what it means to be a Christian. It is quite possible to treat these claims as hypotheses instead (as one might when teaching doctrine - to demonstrate what is at stake, and what kinds of argument support the claims) but emphatically to transform axioms of this kind into hypotheses is probably to cease being a Christian theologian. These claims are not seriously in doubt in Christian theology. If they are not taken to be true, then much liturgical practice becomes mere spectacle, and ceases to enact the renewal of those who meet 'in Christ'.

As well as the claims themselves having an axiomatic status, the categories in which they are posed, and the categories in which further explication of their meaning is couched, also have a special status. Unlike categories such as 'substance', 'time', 'language' or 'knowledge', which undergo periodic radical reinterpretation in the philosophical tradition, theology is marked by other more stable categories such as 'grace', 'love', 'faith', 'hope'. These categories certainly undergo change over time, but it is significantly slower than what one sees in more provisional philosophical categories. To engage in a radical reinterpretation of 'grace' is as theologically problematic as converting core axioms such as 'Jesus is fully God and fully man' into hypotheses: it is probably to suspend one's membership of the tradition.

Scriptural reasoning is an interesting context in which to consider the articulation of such axioms, couched in such categories. It is interesting because when there are three traditions in play, there are different inherited histories of axioms and categories in play. A Christian who claims, 'Jesus is fully God and fully man' takes this to be an axiom. A Jew who utters the same words can only entertain it as an hypotheses: to do otherwise would be to become a Christian. Similarly a Christian who explores this claim by drawing on categories such as 'grace' has quite a limited scope of manoeuvre in regard to its meanings, and is not free to abandon the category in the face of challenges or difficulties. To be a Christian theologian is to be prepared to shoulder the difficulties associated with categories like 'grace', and to work through problems that may arise. A Muslim who investigates the claim about Jesus' divinity and humanity is not constrained in the same way. He may entertain the use of a category like 'grace', but he can be relatively free in the interpretation of this, and - because it is not a central Islamic category - is free to jettison it in favour of other seemingly more fruitful categories.

The matter can be put plainly. What is axiomatic for a Christian may be hypothetical for a Jew; a category which is inviolable for a Christian may be a matter of indifference for a Muslim.

I would argue that this phenomenon nicely shows how truth-claims are by no means abandoned or ruled out in scriptural reasoning. The claim, 'Jesus is fully God and fully man' is a truth-claim. But its status is different in each tradition. It is not a matter of it being 'true for me but false for you'. It is a truth-claim which is either true or false. There is no 'for me' in matters of truth. But there is an obvious difference, which has practical consequences, between taking it as an axiom and taking it as an hypothesis. Similarly, there is no expectation that members of different traditions will make use of the same categories, or - if they do so - accord them the same

inviolability or provisionality. Again this has practical consequences: for prayer, for witness, for self-understanding.

If one is serious about inter-faith encounter, where participants are able to engage as members of their traditions, without bracketing their habits of action and thought, and without surrendering their deeply formed identities, truth-claims must surely play a full role in that encounter. Admittedly there is more to a religious tradition than truth claims, but without them it is not clear that there is anything to those traditions at all.

It is a regrettably common experience in inter-faith dialogue to find Christians saying strange things like 'I am a follower of Jesus (peace be upon Him)'; or to hear Christian prayers in which mention of Jesus or the Trinity is tactfully omitted; or even to discover that the 'Old Testament' is conveniently (but temporarily) transformed into the 'Hebrew Bible'. Scriptural reasoning is a practice which has the capacity to abolish these awkwardnesses. This is because, in each case, they arise because of the mistaken belief that the situation requires a form of words that is acceptable to all. Scriptural reasoning permits the acknowledgement that the situation actually requires different forms of words, or identical forms of words that are treated differently by members of the three traditions. It is Muslims who say, 'peace be upon him', not Christians; it is Christians and not Jews or Muslims who pray in the name of Jesus Christ; it is Jews who read the Tanakh and Christians who read the Old Testament. This is a natural extension of the insight that what is axiomatic for me may be hypothetical for you.

These considerations may not matter terribly much if inter-faith dialogue is a meeting between those who are relatively liberal, theologically speaking, or those who have studied each other's traditions in enough depth to address each other fluently in each other's native languages. But if one seeks inter-faith encounter between orthodox Jews, evangelical Christians and traditional Muslims, a robust framework is needed. Scriptural reasoning has proven to be resilient in the context of such meetings, perhaps because each person speaks confidently from the depths of his or her tradition, with no need to establish a common ground on which to build such speech. Instead of requiring common ground, scriptural reasoning distributes axioms and hypotheses asymmetrically, assigns categories different statuses, and not only permits but requires participants to speak in their own tongues.

## **Conclusion**

These remarks on scriptural reasoning can be concluded with a brief summary. Scriptural reasoning is a practice of inter-faith encounter that is particularly hospitable to those who are not confident that common ground can be found with members of other traditions. It is cheerfully agnostic about whether such common ground is available: it does not require it and nor does it rule it out. Scriptural reasoning is a practice that is structurally sceptical, in a low-key way, about whether consensus on important issues is likely to be found. The discovery of common ground and the generation of consensus are possible outcomes, but they are not necessary conditions.

Instead, it encourages practices of textual study in which understanding is privileged above agreement. If the product is higher quality disagreement rather than the abolition of disagreement - in other words, if the disagreements are actually

intensified in certain respects - this is a mark of success, not failure. It encourages habits of engagement in which collegiality is privileged above consensus. Collegiality is a friendly term for engaging long-term with those with whom one anticipates sustained and persistent disagreements. But it is also more than this. Disagreements actually require a good deal of agreement: on terms of reference, on the questions being posed, on what is at stake. Beyond this, scriptural reasoning permits persistent divergence on which categories are in play, and on the status of those categories which are shared. It perhaps sounds rather bleak, but scriptural reasoning permits the persistence of indifference in relation to certain questions, certain claims and certain categories.

Scriptural reasoning also finely balances the needs of world-disclosure and problem-solving. It is neither exclusively narrative nor one-sidedly reparative. It can be practised in order to discover what kind of world one's colleagues take us to be living in; it can be undertaken to fix damaged relations or to broaden restricted imaginations. It simultaneously acknowledges the command to love God and love one's neighbour: reading scriptures enacts obedience to both commands simultaneously.

Finally, it is worth repeating a desideratum that this paper necessarily fails to meet. There need to be three sets of description of scriptural reasoning; three sets of categories; three histories of interpretation. My presentation attempts to display the virtue of acknowledging this need, but it obviously cannot discharge its tasks. To discover whether scriptural reasoning is a suitable model for inter-faith hermeneutics, it is necessary to add at least two more voices. I suggest that one of the possible modes of action in which such voices can be added is to practise scriptural reasoning and not merely talk about it.